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Coca Cola, Martin Luther King, and the American Dream

by David Schelhaas

After an hour-long wait in the hot Atlanta sun, my daughter Rebecca and I paid our two dollars and entered the cool confines of the Coca Cola pavilion. The best thing about our tour was the opportunity to drink as much Coke as we wished at the end of the tour. Of course there were also the bits of exotic information that these places seem to pour out and which stick, unbidden, in the wrinkles of the brain. During the two minutes we stood in line to see a brief film on the history of Coke, an electronic sign flitted through a million numerals—supposedly the number of Cokes sold in that time. The film told us that the owner of the patent of Coca Cola syrup sold to two farsighted gentlemen for one dollar the right to bottle Coke—an arrangement still in effect today; and that Coke had remained at 5 cents a glass for over sixty years right up into the 1950's.

Of course the building and the displays were bright and beautiful and the young employees handsome in their red vests and perpetual smiles. But the whole thing was—as might be expected—a hymn to Coca Cola. Capitalism in operation. My daughter soon tired of the walls and walls of Coke ads and urged me on to the refreshment room.

We left the Coca Cola pavilion to go to the Martin Luther King Memorial located, appropriately, right up Auburn St. from the Ebenezer Baptist Church where Dr. King once served. We parked this hot Saturday afternoon on the lot of the Martin Luther King Natatorium. No one was swimming.

Auburn Street had been blocked off by barricades with the inscription "Keep out, by order of The Atlanta Police." This time they were there at the request of the community so that a rock band of black and white musicians could perform on a huge platform that had been set up across the width of the street. Food stands hung around at the curbs and the entire street for half a block was filled with people listening to the music. I took a picture of Rebecca standing at the edge of the crowd with a mass of black faces behind her. "Just like Sioux Center, isn't it," I said. She just grinned.

The city where I used to live had black neighborhoods where I would not walk at night, but no places I feared to go in the daytime. Four days ago, in that town, I had walked through a neighborhood where years before I had ministered as a deacon of my church. A funeral was about to take place and there were black people everywhere but I was unafraid. I knew this town. If I had been in another city, I suppose I would have been afraid. Unfamiliarity and ignorance breed fear. But so do anger and poverty. There are black

neighborhoods that I would be afraid to enter and there are white neighborhoods where blacks dare not show their faces. It is a condition spawned by poverty, ignorance, and anger.

Here in this unfamiliar city, in this all black neighborhood, surrounded by this sea of black faces, Rebecca and I felt completely at ease. For both of us, I think, it was a comfort rooted in the non-violent creed that was at the center of Dr. Martin Luther King's teaching and life. It surrounded all of us like a protective shield. Just yesterday we had been at Stone Mountain and I had quoted to Rebecca those lines from "I Have a Dream": "From Stone Mountain in Georgia to Lookout Mountain in Tennessee little black children and little white children shall walk hand in hand." We were walking hand in hand with all of these people.

We came to the King Center from behind, to the reflecting pool where King's marble sarcophagus rests on an island in the middle of the pool. The courtyard between the pool and the main building was a colorful tapestry of people and booths selling jewelry, artwork, and clothing. Here again was capitalism in action, but in the three minutes we stood and watched, only two or three items of carefully examined merchandise were sold.

The actual Martin Luther King exhibition and museum is not large. It has no admission charge so we walked right in and, with the thirty or forty others who were there, followed the story boards around the room.

Earlier in the week we had been in two other museums and in typical fashion our devotion to the written information on the walls had been desultory as we moved about the halls. Here everyone moved slowly, reading each word, pondering the words. I stepped aside and watched Rebecca. She moved slowly, like the others, brow wrinkled in concentration, lips moving slightly. Outside the rock music blared and the peddlers hawked their wares but here it was quiet. Here the atmosphere was calm. The people seemed serious and proud without being worshipful or adulatory. This was not so much a sacred shrine as it was a history lesson. And the story it told was a story I knew—the story of Rosa Parks and the Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in and the Birmingham jail and Freedom Rides. It is a story of faith and conviction and bravery so fine that it made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

When we finished the tour, Rebecca went over to a little stand that held the guest book. "Sign my name, too," I said as she bent to write her name. The pen on the stand was dead so I went to an elderly lady who had set up a table to register voters and asked her for one. "It's a cheap pen," she says as she smiles, and gives me a different pen. We watch Rebecca sign her name and mine.

As we leave, we drive through a neighborhood that has a smudged look. It's not a slum but it is run-down. I think of the L.A. riots and Bensonhurst and Cabrini Green and the Mississippi Delta where blacks still work as sharecroppers. I think of gang wars and crack babies. In my mind I place the

hopelessness and despair and dreamlessness of the inner cities next to the faith and conviction and bravery of the King years. I ask myself what happened. Has the dream been deferred again? Has it shrivelled, like a raisin in the sun? Has it run dry, like a cheap ball-point pen?

I am haunted by another question that I hardly have the right to ask. It is this: Where in the 80's and 90's are the courageous, dedicated, selfless young blacks—and whites—of the 50's and 60's? It is a question that hints at racism and smacks of judgement. But I will ask it because I want to propose an answer—at least a partial answer.

Somewhere in the late 60's idealism died in this country. It died for a lot of reasons, among them, the Vietnam War and the assassinations of John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. And what has replaced it? Something that has always been around but has achieved an unparalleled effect with the growing power of TV advertising. I am talking about materialism, about the pervasive religious belief of our culture which is simply this: Whenever I am unhappy or unfulfilled or vaguely anxious, all I have to do is buy something, a Mac, a Bum shirt, a pair of Nikes, or a Coke. No one seems to ever quite catch on to the fact that this kind of a fix is ever so transient, that it must constantly be repeated.

Rebecca and I stood in two lines that day in Atlanta. One consisted of about a thousand people, one of thirty. One led to a temple of capitalism and the quick fix. "Coke is it!" "It's the real thing." Rebecca and I quickly raced through the walls and walls of advertising because we couldn't wait to get to the refreshment room, our quick fix. The other setting was more demanding. It required concentration. You had to move slowly and read the script to get the message. It told, not of quick fixes, but of a long and arduous journey.

I wonder if the large number of middle class blacks and whites today—whose counterparts of the 50's and 60's marched, ironically, for their economic freedom—have simply replaced the Dream of Martin Luther King for all the crassest parts of the American Dream—cars and suburban houses and the ostentatious good life. Could that be why no one's around to continue the fight begun by the idealistic young people of the fifties and sixties? If that's so, it is a pity. For they can be sure that like that cheap ball-point pen, it will soon run out; like the next can of Coke they buy, it will be only moments before they hear the slurpy gurgle at the end of the straw that tells them it is empty.